

From Affinity Bias to Gender Parity: Transforming Workplace Culture with Dr. Brittany Boone

Announcer: You're listening to HR Mixtape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Dr. Brittany Boone, an industrial and organizational psychologist and diversity and inclusion consultant. She has extensive experience designing and delivering diversity and inclusion training across sectors, including finance, entertainment, and beauty. And her work extends to clients in the US and abroad. Known for her hands-on approach, Dr. Boone holds a PhD in organizational psychology and uses her expertise to foster more inclusive workplace cultures.

Shari Simpson: Dr. Boone, thank you so much for sitting down with me today. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Brittany Boone: I'm happy to be here. Colorado, it's beautiful.

Shari Simpson: It is beautiful here. This is my happy space. I live in Chicagoland, so being able to come out here is just, it's very centering.

Dr. Brittany Boone: A fellow Midwesterner. I'm in Kansas City.

Shari Simpson: Oh, yeah. You know that. You know. And it's cool to see a mountain every once in a while. I think we're getting some snow tomorrow, so we might be able to see some snow.

Dr. Brittany Boone: I don't need that. I'm going to get out of here before that.

Shari Simpson: Okay. Fingers crossed. You can get out of here before that. But what we're talking about today is unconscious bias. And I want to start with why do we even have to talk about that if we have great DEI policies?

Dr. Brittany Boone: I think talking about bias is important because it's one of those things that I feel like humans have a tendency to attribute to their, they attach it to their goodness. So they're like, Hey, I'm a good person. Like that's, I don't do that. Like that's not how I was raised. And so if you're not willing to look at your patterns and look at how they might impact the work that you're doing or how you're working with people, even your friends and who you choose to befriend and socialize with, you know, outside of the workplace, then it's hard to have really meaningful DEI efforts because you know that we're not really willing to look at ourselves, you know, turn that mirror inward. So I think that I always tell people in the work that I do is none of this is about your goodness as people. Like bias is about how our brains work, you know, wanting to make these patterns, saving ourselves time, the things we've been exposed to from the time that we are children, like all of those things. So it has nothing to do with how good we are as people. So even if we make decisions based on our biases, it doesn't make us bad people. But what we want to do is be aware and look at it. So I think that you need both. You want that self-awareness piece and you want to

be able to look at that, but you also need the DEI fallacies too. So you want to have both of them, I believe.

Shari Simpson: Well, and you're so right about the context of how, you know, bias gets created. I think back to earlier in my career, and I've shared this story on the podcast before, but I definitely was one of those females who was like crying at work as a female. I have zero respect for it. And I have to own that, that I used to think that. And as I've grown and developed my own understanding of emotions in general, a crying female is any different than a screaming male. It is an emotion at a heightened state. But man, if I hadn't ever gotten over that hump or that information, so you're absolutely right. It's there.

Dr. Brittany Boone: And that's what you were taught. That's the pattern you were taught. Crying equals weak. Crying equals this. Crying is something that women do. Yeah. And you know, and then that opens you up to all sorts of other things. That's why we can't give you feedback, Brittany, because you're going to cry. And so it's, yeah, that willingness to look at that and look at ourselves, super important.

Shari Simpson: What are some common biases or unconscious biases that you see in the workplace right now?

Dr. Brittany Boone: So I'll give you, I'll give you two answers. So the first thing I'll say is the most common bias that I think shows up just, you know, based on the work that I've done and what I see is this idea of affinity bias. So it's not that, not to say that it doesn't happen where people have bias against something, but you know, bias is a preference for or against. But I think that preference for is something that we see show up often, but we don't really think of that as being biased. So it's like, oh, you went to my same school. You and I, we're from the Midwest. So, you know, we know what that's like. We went to the same school. We cheer for the same team. Our kids grew up together. We are in the same fraternity or sorority, whatever it is. And we just want to help those people and we want to go towards you and make those connections. You know, nothing against the rest of y'all, but you know, she's a Kansas City Chiefs fan like me. And so I just, you know, I have this connection with her and I want to connect with her and I want to make sure she knows the ropes and introduce her to the right people and make sure I make these connections. I just want them to know your face. And what about all of those other people who aren't Kansas City Chiefs fans, you know? And so people don't think about it like that. But Dr. Mazarin Banaji, she's a pioneer in, you know, the field of study of bias research. And one of her quotes that we often talk about in our sessions is that, you know, we don't seek to harm people, but we help those who are like us. But we don't see that as being harmful because we're taught that helping is a good thing. So that's the first thing. I think I see affinity bias show up a lot. But sometimes when we do discussions and we ask participants to like weigh in and chime in on their own experiences with bias, sometimes we still hear those classic things like women being asked to take notes and women being asked to do those administrative tasks and

things like, oh, you don't sound Latino. You don't look Jewish. You don't act gay. You know, so there's those those things are still there. They're still, even though they might not be as pronounced as we think they are, they are still happening, those little things. So I think I see all of those things happening, if that's a fair answer. Shari Simpson: Yeah, well, and that example you gave happens in the real world. The other day, I was at an activity with my husband, and me and another wife were talking to one of the husbands about making plans. And so we were trying to find a date where we could all hang out, and we landed on one. And the gentleman goes, OK, one of you text my wife this information. And I looked at him, and granted, we're friends, and I was like, absolutely not. I was like, your phone is in your hand. You text your wife. I'm not your secretary. And he was like, man, you got saucy. I was like, nope, just advocating for myself.

Dr. Brittany Boone: And what happens in workplaces, too, is it's hidden underneath the guise of, oh, I'm not good at that. Like, Brittany, I'm not, my handwriting is terrible. Brittany, can you write that down? Brittany, I'm not really that, I'm not just as organized as you. Can you do that? And I mean, cheat code that happens in your personal lives as well with things around the house, all of those things. But under the guise of the incompetence thing, we ask women to do certain things, often, all the time.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, well, and you know, there's those funny jokes out there about incompetence when it comes to older generations asking younger generations for help. Like, hey, can you show me how to make this a PDF? That kind of stuff, right? Yep. How do we start to uncover or start to have these deeper conversations about unconscious bias? Because that's the thing, they're unconscious. Like, it's coming from all this background that you have. How do you start to teach employees and yourself as an HR person, what is the bias that I'm bringing to the table?

Dr. Brittany Boone: I think the best way to be able to teach other people is to look at yourself first. To be able to, like I said, turn that mirror inward and look at your own biases because you're not going to be able to convince someone else that it's important or convince someone else that they have them and that it's worth looking at if you have yourself not done that thing. So whether you're in HR, whether you're not in HR and you're a leader, you know, looking at your own patterns first. And the thing about unconscious biases, like you said, they're unconscious, so you don't see them. And maybe you don't see them unless someone tells you. So maybe ask someone that you trust about the patterns that they recognize or that they see in you. Or, you know, unconscious biases can also be uncovered when you just take a step back. You take a step back and look at your own patterns. Who do I have a tendency to go towards in the workplace? Who do I have a tendency to go away from? Who are my go-to people? Are there people that I go to all the time if I have a question or if I need something done? Am I going to the same people all the time? And look at those people. Like, you know, be intentional about looking at your habits

because what we tell people is although, you know, I'm telling you to look at these things, I'm not saying don't ever connect with other Kansas City Chiefs fans. Don't ever connect with people who you would. But just paying attention to your patterns because if you are only you know, working with people based on that, then you are going to be, you know, letting your biases have more control than you think they are and let them, you know, guide your decision making.

Shari Simpson: As HR professionals, I think in our formal education, we sit in this space where we're learning a lot about diversity, equity, inclusion initiatives. that isn't always the case with our leaders who are maybe at the C-suite level, who have maybe just a marketing background or a business background. Their formal education's a little different than ours. And so often we've been in a spot where we have to introduce concepts like unconscious bias. And for our listeners, I know you can't see Dr. Boone shaking her head, but she is. You know, the ultimate goal is to come across that we are helping move the business forward, not that we're calling somebody out.

Dr. Brittany Boone: So our approach, and when I say our, I'm with Velocart Consulting based in New York, so I'm talking about how we approach this work. And a lot of times people who are in leadership positions, they need to see how it affects the bottom line. So how does it affect what we're doing, because yes, it can be important for a person to person, but oftentimes, diversity and inclusion, bias, all of that gets the reputation as being like the squishy stuff. Like, oh, why do we need to do that? Why do we need to spend time on that? So you need to let them know why you need to spend time on that. You know, diverse teams perform better. They're more creative. They're more innovative. There's research that shows when people feel like they belong, they're more engaged. When people are more engaged, job satisfaction increases. Job dissatisfaction decreases. You know, intent to quit decreases. So all of those employee loyalty increases, all of those things. So if you want people to be engaged and if you want to get the best out of them, this is something we have to be looking at. So I feel like showing them why it is important to them, how it affects the business and the bottom line and not just the individuals. Because even though we should care about that, as leaders, when you're looking at it from such a high level, sometimes that bottom line is what they need. And so that's been helpful for us to try to drive that point home with people who are very, very senior in leadership roles.

Shari Simpson: Especially if you're in a company where your bottom line is being evaluated by stockholders and boards and those kinds of things. So yeah, you absolutely have to have a little bit of a different perspective with that. Based on the work you do, you get an amazing opportunity to work with different organizations. Do you have a story that jumps out at you that you're like, from point A to point B, then going through this journey and realizing things like bias and unconscious bias had this huge impact when they were able to address it?

Dr. Brittany Boone: So we have a private equity firm that we have worked with for maybe the last, I think since 2020. And so we worked with them to develop a series of workshops. We have done workshops for their portfolio companies, for their up and coming leaders. And we've really, they've really worked to like embedded into their culture in a way that I've not really seen a lot of other clients do, just really from soup to nuts. They worked with us, you know, we would put together what we thought was a really good workshop and they'd be like, I don't know. So it was, you know, and it was sort of, you know, there was a lot of back and forth, but it came out just really well. And so we've rolled it out. We've been rolling it out to all of their new people when they start. We rolled it out to all of their leaders, all of their employees. And, you know, at the end of 2022, they reached gender parity within their firm. So, you know, that felt good to, you know, work with them from designing the workshop to rolling it out to everyone. And then even what we're just doing with their portfolio companies that aren't necessarily in their firm and then see their numbers change like that. So, you know, there's no right way to do this work. So I'm not saying that that's the approach you have to take and that's what everyone should be doing, but it feels like a success story. So it's good to, you know, hear and learn things like that, that you see your clients doing.

Shari Simpson: Oh yeah, absolutely. There's this need to make sure that the environments that we are fostering are environments where we can address this stuff. You know, I think back to, you know, two leaders ago that I worked for and we were in a team meeting and she used the phrase, low man on the totem pole. And I pulled her aside after the meeting, I was like, hey, by the way, you really can't say that anymore. Here's why, here's the history. And she was like, really? And I was like, yeah. And it's been kind of this ongoing joke with us now, you know, that when she'll say something, she'll look at me and be like, is that, can I say that?

Announcer: Is that okay?

Shari Simpson: Great, and I don't know every idiom's history, but it's been my own journey to make sure that, you know, as I speak on a podcast, that I'm not saying those kinds of things. But the context of that came from our relationship. I had a really good relationship. We had psychological safety with each other. How do we start teaching leaders to create environments? Cause we do talk about psychological safety, but I feel like this is like one level higher than that because people can react really passionately, especially for how we started the conversation where people wouldn't say, for example, I'm racist, but maybe the thing they said was racist. And so how do we foster that environment where we can have those tough conversations civilly?

Dr. Brittany Boone: Mm-hmm. That's a good question. So you said two things that are really important. You mentioned the psychological safety piece and then the idea of feedback, you know, being able to give because we often think of feedback as going down the hierarchy. So I am your boss. I'm going to give you feedback. But there has to,

you know, come a time when you have to be able to give me feedback as well. Feedback has to be able to go both ways. And I think that in my experience, I have worked with a lot of clients with senior leaders often, I'm speaking very slowly and I'm being really intentional with these words, often there is seems to be a posture of do as I say, not as I do. So yes, when you come and bring that to me, I might blow up at you and I might make you feel small when I respond to you, but it's okay. I still want you to bring things to me. I still want you to be honest. And so I think leaders have to take a real good look at, you know, and even if we're thinking about who is in leadership right now just by virtue of age and, you know, how times progress. Most of the time leaders are going to be of a certain age because you've been doing this work the longest. And so times have changed. And, you know, even if you look at the comedy from the 80s, those things aren't appropriate anymore. And so if we have to think about our leadership style that we, you know, sometimes we think, well, this is what happened when I was, you know, coming through and this is, and there's like this hazing mentality about you got to pay your dues and this is what has to happen. But Maybe that is true, but do you want to be right or do you want to be effective? Because if you want to be effective, you have to create a space where people can come and bring those things to you. So I think it does start with the leadership. I think it starts with really modeling those things, making it safe, fostering that psychological safety. Something that my boss often says is, and he did this with me when I first started working, working with him and he checks in every once in a while. What are the things that I say and do that make it easy to work with me? What are the things that I say and do that might make it more difficult to work with me? And what my boss says is that people can't resist being a little bit honest, just a little bit. So even if it's not 100%, maybe it's 20%, maybe it's 25. So when I'm 25% honest with you and I see that it's safe and nothing happened, maybe next time you ask me, I'll be 50% honest. And then maybe the next time I'll be fully honest. So, you know, it doesn't happen overnight, but we have to plant those seeds and show that it is safe to have those conversations and safe to give that feedback and inviting that feedback as leaders, opening up the floor for those conversations and not waiting as leaders, waiting on other people to raise the conversation. You raise it. You have to show that it's important. You have to model that this is something that is, you know, a priority for you so that we'll talk about it. So it's just all of that works to create a coaching culture where we can coach each other all directions.

Shari Simpson: I love that. I recently read a post about, you know, your own personal development and how you can seek feedback from, you know, your circle of professional and personal. And they were like, send out a survey and ask them what your top, you know, three traits are that you know you're really good at. And what I thought was interesting about this approach was they said, ask the second question. what are three positive traits that I'm not demonstrating? And I was like, what a great way of kind of asking for your

weaknesses, but from the perspective of these are strengths that if you had them, it'd be like your 10X. So it's shifting that, right? Shifting the conversation around that this work and these hard conversations, while hard, are gonna be so productive and end up in a positive place. I love that question.

Dr. Brittany Boone: It's great.

Shari Simpson: It's great. What are some of the things that we should be asking our leaders as we, as we think about developing these programs, right? Because they're coming at it from a totally different perspective and elevation, and they're bringing everything to the table and you want to be supportive, but there's no cookie cutter way to do this, like you said. So how do we kind of investigate what's going to work in our organization?

Dr. Brittany Boone: I think that, to your point, there's no right way, there's no cookie cutter way. Every organization is going to need something different based on the type of work that you do, based on even just when we go into different organizations to present, we dress differently. If we're going to the beauty industry, I'm gonna dress differently there than if I'm going to a law firm, then a private equity firm, and then how old is a private equity firm? So I think it's figuring out what the baseline is. And so sometimes you can do that via interviews, you can do that via focus groups to figure out what your teams, what your organization's priorities are. Where do they see maybe there's some room for improvement? Where do they see that we're doing really well so that we can? Because, you know, we often like to the point that we just made about that question, asking it in reverse. You know, we ask about the things that maybe we're not doing so well, but we can leverage the things that we're already doing and we can grow those things. And how are we successful at that? So I think assessing where you are starting so that you know, how do we order these things? How do we prioritize these things? Is it a training? Is it focus groups? Is it maybe training for the leadership. And we don't need to be training everyone else first. Maybe we need to get to the leaders first. Maybe that's what it is. So just figuring out where what your baseline is and starting there.

Shari Simpson: As you work with organizations, what are some of the top misconceptions or missteps you've seen them take as they try to go through this work?

Dr. Brittany Boone: I've sort of already mentioned it, it's that idea of attaching this idea of bias to your goodness. And so we don't do that, that doesn't happen here. We're a meritocracy, that doesn't happen, you know, and so not even being willing to interrogate that and look at it at all, I think that can be a big misstep. And then the only other thing I would add to that is after you have done the training, after you've done the workshop, sometimes it's like, okay, That's it. We did it. We're bias-free because you came and talked to us about bias. But what's the follow-up? It cannot be a one and done. It can't be a parachute in. And research actually shows that parachuting in and out can actually be more harmful because it looks more like a check the box. how are leaders continuing the

conversation? What's the accountability for when people aren't, you know, modeling these things that we have said as an organization we are committed to? Because that's when the real work happens. And often it seems like, and you know this, especially over the last year or so, diversity and inclusion efforts are the first to go. When things start shifting and when money is changing and these things are different, that's the first thing to go. But what message is that sending?

Because those things, you know, I said we have to start with assessing where we are. Those things are still there. And so how are we? That's what I think would be the biggest thing is the follow up. What are we doing after the workshop?

Shari Simpson: So as we kind of get to the end of our conversation, I know it's gone quick. You know, I've been fortunate that I've worked for several organizations that have always had unconscious bias training as part of our kind of our training curriculum for employees and have put major efforts into the DEI space. And I've worked for organizations where leadership has decided that they're going to do that. And the response from the employee population surprised me. It wasn't open for it. What is your advice there for maybe those HR professionals who are sitting in that same spot where maybe leadership is on board, you have all the support and backing you need, but your employee population is responding poorly or unexpectedly?

Dr. Brittany Boone: I think I would take the same approach with them that I would take with leaders and sort of showing and demonstrating why this is important. And often when we're doing workshops, even if it's not necessarily for senior leaders or leaders at all, we oftentimes talk about the business case. And, you know, if we are all here and this is our goal, if we are a private equity firm, for a law firm, whatever our goal is as an organization, we're going to be better equipped to reach this goal if we do this. here's the business case for it. So I think sometimes, because leaders are people and everyone comes at it from that, it's like, oh, why do I have to do this? And especially to the extent that it is not impacting you. It's really easy to think that this stuff is, you know, the squishy stuff, the soft stuff, it's when you're not being impacted by it. So having those conversations, I also think is important because to the extent that people are talking to each other, you mentioned the importance of relationships. Relationships are important because we often think that the way we are experiencing the world, our workplace, is the way that it is. And we use ourselves as litmus tests and like, well, I don't know, that didn't happen to me. That wasn't my experience. But if you and I have a relationship and I can have that conversation with you, and maybe you're more apt to believe that this training is important because of what I've shared with you about my experience. So I think fostering those relationships and then just really hammering home the business case and how even if you have your personal feelings about it, if you want us to be successful as this law firm, as this whatever, this is something that's going to help us do that.

Shari Simpson: Such good advice, Dr. Boone. Thank you so much for sitting down and chatting with me.

Dr. Brittany Boone: Thank you for having me. This has been great. If you need me to come back, I'm happy to do it. I'm a talker. Just let me know.

Shari Simpson: I will keep that in mind for the future. But again, this was wonderful. Likewise. Thank you so much.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.